Epic of Sundiata

The ***Sundiata Keita*** or ***Epic of Sundiata*** (also referred to as the ***Sundiata Epic*** or ***Sunjata Epic***) /sʊnˈdʒɑːtə/ is an epic poem of the Malinke people and tells the story of the hero Sundiata Keita (died 1255), the founder of the Mali Empire. The epic is an instance of oral tradition, going back to the 13th century and narrated by generations of griot poets or *jeliw* (*djeli*). There is no single or authoritative version.[1] Material pertaining to the epic first began to be collected during the early 20th century in French Sudan, notably by the French elite school École William Ponty, resulting in the "modern" version of the tale as considered standard today, as published in "novelistic" form in French translation by Djibril Tamsir Niane in 1960 (English translation 1965).

Contents

Historical context and significance
Plot
References
Further reading
External links

Historical context and significance

The amount of historicity of the events portrayed in the epic is open to debate. There are some limited 14th-century Arabic historiographic sources available on the early history and of the Mali Empire, notably the records of Ibn Khaldun. Therefore, the evidence of oral tradition may be critical in reconstructing the historical events of the period. Oral tradition necessarily undergoes significant changes over the course of several centuries, but scholars have nevertheless attempted to pinpoint elements in the epic that might reflect historical events.[2]

Written summaries of the epic existed in Arabic before 1890. During the 1890s, versions of the epic were collected by French officials and published in French and German translation beginning in 1898. Western-educated West Africans began to produce literary versions of the tale beginning in the 1930s. This was notably the case at the French elite school, École William Ponty, which staged a drama based on the story in 1937. This period represents the first interaction of the oral tradition with literacy and modernity, and the transformations undergone by the narrative in the context of the 1937 presentation ... eventually resulted in the form of the epic which became most influential in the 1940s and 1950s, before the first "novelistic" treatment by Niane (1960). The first line-by-line transcription of the epic as told by a griot was made in 1967.[3]

As an oral historical epic, Sundiata conveys information not only about the history of the Mali Empire, but also about the culture of the Mande ethnic group. Mande family structures had two elements—constructive (*badenya*) or destructive (*fadenya*). *Fadenya*, or "father-child-ness," is the rivalry between half-siblings, and is represented in the epic of Sundiata by the animosity between Sundiata, son of Sogolon, and Dankaran Touman, son of Sassouma (king Nare Marghan's first wife). The destructive forces of fadenya eventually cause Sundiata and his mother to be exiled from Mali, in the fear that Sassouma would hurt Sogolon's family. *Badenya*, or "mother-child-ness," is the affection between children of the same mother. This is represented in the epic by the support of Sundiata's sister, Kolonkan, in watching over him against Sassouma's attempts at witchcraft, and by his siblings' later support of him in his battle to reclaim Mali. Maternal support is also important for Sundiata to overcome his physical impairment and begin to walk in response to his mother's pleading. The importance of the mother is underscored by the narrator, who says "the child is worth no more than the mother is worth."[4] Significantly, Sundiata needed both the opposing forces of *fadenya* and *badenya* to fulfill his destiny, indicating that both elements are necessary to Mande culture .

The epic of Sundiata is still an integral part of Mande traditional culture and the story continues to be retold by griots and through masked ritual performances. Today the epic of Sundiata has also become part of the official national mythology of the republics of Mali, Gambia, Senegal and Guinea and is studied in history lessons in primary school curricula.[5]

Plot

In the *Epic of Sundiata* (also spelled Son-Jara or Sundjata) Naré Maghann Konaté (also called Maghan Kon Fatta or Maghan the Handsome) was a Mandinka king who one day received a soothsaying hunter at his court. The hunter predicted that if Konaté marrie an ugly woman, she would give him a son who would one day be a mighty king. Naré Maghann Konaté was already married to Sassouma Bereté and had a son by her, Dankaran Toumani Keïta. However, when two Traoré hunters from the Do kingdom presented him an ugly, hunchbacked woman named Sogolon, he remembered the prophecy and married her. She soon gave birth to a son, Sundiata Keita, who was unable to walk throughout his childhood. Sassouma was jealous of the child and mother and would make fun of Sundiata for his inability to walk and the ugliness he inherited from his mother.[6] Despite his physical weakness, the king still granted Sundiata his own griot at young age; this was in order to have them grow together and provide constant consultation as was custom.[7]

With the death of Naré Maghann Konaté (c. 1224), his first son, Dankaran Tuman, assumed the throne despite Konaté's wishes that the prophecy be respected. Sundiata and his mother, who now had given birth to two daughters and adopted a second son from Konaté's third wife Namandjé, suffered the scorn of the new king and his mother. After an insult against Sogolon, Sundiata requested an iron rod from the blacksmith Nounfari, which broke when he tried to use it in order to pull himself upright and walk. Only when he used a branch of S'ra (African baobab or Adansonian tree) was he able to walk. In one version of the epic, Sundiata is able to walk after his father dies and his mother orders him to do so. He then becomes a great hunter.[6] Nonetheless, the hatred of Sassouma Bereté and Dankaran Toumani Keita soon drove Sundiata, his mother, and his two sisters into exile in the Mema kingdom. In one version of the epic, Sundiata and his mother are not exiled. Sogolon feels that she and her son are in danger because of Sassouma's jealousy and left to keep them safe. Neighboring kingdoms are unwilling to harbor Sundiata and Sogolon in fear of what Sassouma and her son would do, but the Mema people take them in.[6]

While living in the Mema kingdom, Sundiata began to grow "as strong as a lion", and he fought with the greatest general of the Mema people, Moussa Tounkara.[6] Sundiata became such a great warrior to the degree that he was made heir to the Mema throne. However, Sogolon encouraged him to "fulfill his destiny" and return to Mali to become king.[6]

Meanwhile, Soumaoro Kanté, cruel sorcerer king of Sosso, attacked the Mandinka kingdom, causing Dankaran Toumani to take flight in fear. Before reaching Mali, Soumaoro had conquered nine kingdoms in the Ghana Empire. He was a notoriously cruel leader.[6] The oppressed Mandinka people then sent for the exiled Sundiata. Forging a coalition of neighboring small kingdoms, Sundiata waged a war against the Sosso, finally Sundiata was later crowned with the title "Mansa," or "king of kings", as the first ruler of the Mali Empire. He soon set about organizing the nucleus of the empire, presenting the Gbara of nobles and notables at his coronation with an oral constitution known as the Kouroukan Fouga. His model for government would guide the empire into greatness. His exploits have even been compared to those of Alexander the Great by some griots.[8]

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External links

- Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali, by D.T. Niane (Trans. by G.D. Pickett)
- Background information on Sundiata. Sections include Geography, Religion, Society & Politics
- History of Mali. With reference to Sundiata and his successors.

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